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# The Classical Weekly

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## SIGHT READING<sup>1</sup>

Most students, and, I am afraid, some teachers, regard the operation of reading Latin or Greek at sight as a more or less magical performance. They think that the sight passages on the College Entrance examination papers should be prepared for by a special kind of class-room practice, different in kind from that employed in dealing with the required reading. They are, perhaps, seduced by the Lorelei of rapid reading', wherein a class is hurried by the teacher over—not through—large portions of text, and accumulates about as much reliable knowledge as does a party of Cook's tourists at Pompeii.

Now this is a pity, because reading at sight is a valuable and strengthening experience when it is correctly done. But it cannot be so done unless the teacher founds his method on a paradox—first, that there is no such thing as sight reading, and, secondly, that all reading should be sight reading.

When we say that there is no such thing as sight reading, we mean, of course, that no one can be expected to apply to the solution of a problem knowledge which he has not already gained. He cannot invent paradigms as he goes along, or grasp brand new rules of syntax by intuition, or know the meaning of words whose elements give no clue to their connotation. To be sure, an intelligent reader will interpret many a subjunctive which he may be unable to label with its official tag, and he can infer the meaning of some words from context or derivation, but this does not contradict the original statement. He could not deal with the subjunctive at all if previous experience had not given him a conception of the significance of that mood, and he could not guess the meaning of a word if he did not have knowledge of its root-meaning or formative elements, or if the context did not proclaim just what was needed to fill the gap. If neither of these helps were adequate, we should tell him the meaning to begin with. To ask a pupil to read at sight is really to say to him, 'Apply to this passage here and now the knowledge which you have already gained', in contrast to the implication, when lessons are given to be prepared in private, that he will consult dictionary, Grammar, and notes (and nothing else) before he makes public the result of his labors. The only difference—and it is not a material difference—is that the teacher is at hand to supply defects of memory and to stand in place of lexicon and Grammar. That is to say, this should be the only difference. As a matter of fact, there is often a wide gap between the

two processes, because the teacher in his haste will tell both too much and too little, and because the pupil at his leisure works by bad methods, either from laziness or because he has not been taught in the class-room how to attack a passage with a reasonable certainty of discovering the sense.

Thus we arrive at the second member of the paradox: while there is no such thing as sight reading, considered as a unique process applicable only or mainly to passages for which the student is not allowed to consult a dictionary, yet his first onslaught on a passage should always be made as if the reserves of notes, Grammar, and dictionary could not be called up. He must nerve himself to the task as if he were a surgeon in the operating-room, to whom his medical library is now only a remembered source of present strength. *Nunc animis opus, o tiro, nunc pectore firmo!*

One who is made to do this is at once benefited in several ways. He becomes acutely aware that a rule in the head is worth two in the book, he is compelled to focus his attention sharply on the text before him, for it is his only source of information, and he is forced to make demands on his memory which he is not so likely to make if he may substitute reference to a vocabulary for the effort to recall a word once seen and half remembered. Finally, he is sharply reminded of whatever failings he may have in his working knowledge of forms and syntax.

If the foregoing statements are true, it becomes evident that our problem is not the narrow one of teaching pupils to read at sight: it is rather that of teaching them how to read on all occasions. Confronted by a sight-passage, a student is driven to observe the text more closely than when he is attempting to recite something which he has prepared with every aid at hand, as is proved by the astonishing fact—a fact which has received additional proof since these words were written—that candidates who take the papers of the College Entrance Examination Board often do the sight-passages much better than those selected from the required reading. But it is one thing to look, and another to see. The reader must know what to look for, and he must be equipped to recognize it when he finds it. There is not much use in telling a pupil to observe the forms of all words sharply if his knowledge of forms is uncertain. As a preliminary to reading, if one is just taking over a class which he has not taught before, a review of forms, including practice in the identification of forms gathered as they spring up in the text, is a kind of setting-up drill which is well worth while.

But, assuming that forms have been adequately taught, and that every-day syntax is understood, how

<sup>1</sup>This paper was read at the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of The Classical Association of the Atlantic States, at Hunter College, April 23, 1921.

is the reader to go to work? I am thinking now not of one trying to pass an examination, but of what should go on in the class-room of a teacher who is training pupils to read.

On most sight examination papers one is directed to read the passage through several times before attempting to translate. This is sound advice for one taking an examination, as it may provide him with a context which, even though hazy, may save him from absurd errors. In the class, however, I think this unnecessary, at least as a routine procedure: the pupil has no more need for the next sentence than had the Greek or the Roman reader for whom it was written. Even if the next sentence is designed to clarify the vagueness of the one before it, as when a *nam* points to fuller light as one advances, it is better to consider the first sentence narrowly before going on.

Let us suppose an ideal situation for the teacher to exercise his skill—a fairly long, complex sentence which the pupil confesses, after a preliminary canter, that he cannot read. How shall he proceed? According to the instructions contained in Professor Hale's notable treatise, *The Art of Reading Latin: How to Teach It*, he should examine the first word, without reference to what follows, and consider all its grammatical possibilities, then proceed to the next word, apply the same process, and so on, observing as he goes how word connects with word, until the whole structure of the sentence stands revealed. He accompanies this process with tentative translations, which he revises as the evidence accumulates, arriving at his complete interpretation by a process of trial and error, as it were. This has the advantage of calling up in review all that one has learned about grammar, and, of course, of making the reader painfully aware of what he has not learned. It is an admirable antidote to mental messiness, and it emphasizes a fact which many persons do not seem to realize, that the construction of every word is explained by some word which precedes or follows it in its own clause—that every word (expletives excepted) is geared into some other word in the sentence. In the hands of a skilful teacher it reveals the dramatic quality in the order in which ideas are presented—first, perhaps, the subject and object, like actors on the stage at the raising of the curtain, while the following words both supply the scenery and expound the plot. Nothing escapes: suspense is in the air until the last verb, lightning-like, illuminates and ends the scene. In spite of the patent virtues of this method, however, I should use it rather as a strengthening exercise than as an invariable routine. In the first place, I should always let a pupil translate, when he can, without demanding from him the whole rationale of the process, and reserve this more drastic discipline for occasions when he begins to be slovenly, or finds himself hopelessly entangled. I should do this for two reasons; first, because it is encouraging to read rapidly when one can, and, second, because I do not believe that even the Romans took in ideas word by word, any more than we do, but by groups of words, just as we recognize a human being as such without taking a biological

inventory of his parts. It may be worth while once or twice to note the relation of the words in *quae cum illa sint*, for example; but it swiftly passes into the blessed class of complexes which we recognize without the need of further analysis. In fact, a preliminary survey of a sentence, designed to discover such complexes, is, it seems to me, likely to yield results equally valuable with those obtained by playing the game rigidly according to Hale.

But, whatever method we may prefer, I think we shall agree that the first duty of the reader is to look at the Latin. That seems like a simple suggestion; but a somewhat long experience has convinced me that, simple as it is, it is a proceeding which many pupils do not automatically follow. What is the pupil to look for? Mainly for terminations, that he may recognize here an accusative, there a subjunctive, yonder an adverb; as one on entering a room goes through his mental 'Look who's here', as Tom, Dick, and Harry, Jane, Mary, and Paulina greet his gaze. The comparison is imperfect, because Tom and Mary are more like word-roots, while inflections tell us what the words are doing in the sentence; but, to escape from the bogs of simile, let me say plainly that the reader's first concern is rather with grammar than with vocabulary. In examining a strange machine we instinctively distinguish a wheel from a spring; then we notice how the gears mesh and where the levers are attached; finally, and only then, do we feel able to judge with any confidence what the machine is for.

Now, many a student knows, and acts upon the knowledge, that the subject of a finite verb is in the nominative case, and cherishes other maxims equally golden; but, while he will freely admit, if you choose to put it to him in that way, that every nominative not on special duty as adjective, appositive, or predicate noun—I hope you do not like the term 'attribute complement' any better than I do—is but a blighted being until it is wedded to some agreeable verb, that a well-bred genitive prefers to be chaperoned by a discreet noun, and that transitive verbs shrink from appearing in public without their objects, yet he is apt to display an appalling lack of social address in getting the right people together; as though a distracted hostess should try to solve the problem of seating her guests at dinner by pairing them off, man and maid, without introduction and without regard for affinity or preference. Just as any large company of people, left to themselves, will collect in groups, with here and there a solitary person, like an interjection of pain, restless and unattached, so the pupil must learn not only that a sentence has its committees and sub-committees, so to speak, but that there are signs by which he may determine who's who in the period. After he has identified the wooing subjects and the waiting verbs, and perhaps paired off the obsequious adjectives with the nouns with which they are at such pains to agree, he will begin to see that his sentence is like a train of cars on the New York subway, only rather more chummy than that, each with its own verb to act as motor, each linked to its fellow by some conjunctive word, and all, if you like, controlled by

the subject of the main verb, to wit, the motor-man in the front car—though I am aware that in certain points this comparison will not bear very close scrutiny.

But at least we may push the parallel a little farther. The normal and only safe way to understand the activities of the people in a train is to walk through the train from end to end. Otherwise you may forget who was luxuriating in the parlor car, who was dining, which was the fireman, and whether or not some charming young thing had been sitting in the smoker. The right perspective of a Latin sentence is most surely apprehended by taking the first word first, the second word second, and so on. In that way one soon learns that a nominative in clause *a* is no more likely to be the subject of the verb in clause *b* than is a man sitting in the back seat of the rear car likely to be aware of what someone in the car ahead is writing in his notebook. Of course ellipsis and repetition make exceptions of a sort; but in general we have made a great stride when we have induced a class to believe that a clause is what its name implies—a closed cell, living its own life, even though that life is in turn part of the life of some greater organism. I sometimes tell a class that complex sentences are all either eggs or sausages. Into the white of an egg the yolk is injected, as a relative clause may interrupt the continuity of some other clause which began before it and ends after it; or each clause may go on to its end without a break, when the thought crosses the bridge of the conjunction to the next clause, and devours that in turn.

There is no need to say much about the interrelation of words within the clause, partly because, when once the principle that the clause is a water-tight compartment has been grasped, the elements of the remaining problem are relatively few. The idea that words are looking for partners soon takes root, and the pupil easily learns that a subject inevitably links arms with the next verb that comes along in the same clause, provided that verb bears the proper insignia of number and person. He can be taught that doubtful datives and ablatives will nine times out of ten unmask as soon as the verb is reached, and, in the same way, that it is often well to pause at that verb, as on an isle of safety in a crowded street, and consider what is likely to come next. So many verbs have preferences in the way of case or mood to follow that it pays to study their facial expression before plunging ahead. Or say to the reckless reader, 'Suppose you found that word at the end of the last line on a page, what would you expect to find when you turned the page over?'. This is, of course, the basic idea in Professor Hale's treatise, and to this extent I think that his method is sanctioned by both logic and experience.

There is, perhaps, food for reflection on the disparity between the number of terms used in Grammars and the use which is made of many of the categories in actual reading. A boy's common-sense may, and generally will lead him to translate *requies laboris* correctly; but neither the name of that genitive nor anything in his experience is likely to relieve the impression that the construction is, to say the least,

whimsical. Not that it cannot be explained to him; but this particular phrase is, I think, one of the first instances where he has to break loose from the belief that the genitive is normally a sign of 'of' or of the possessive case. I do not believe in teaching principles in advance of their use when this can be avoided; but, if the occurrence of this phrase did happen to be the first time that the pupil had to be given a broader knowledge of the genitive, I should want to use the opportunity to reveal to him the fact that the genitive was the equivalent of many kinds of prepositional phrases used in English to modify nouns, rather than to distress myself deeply over his ability to label this particular genitive 'objective'. Similarly, I should teach him to observe closely what kinds of subjunctive went into English via the indicative without the aid of any auxiliary verb, and tell him that, if he met a strange subjunctive, he might with safety adopt any way of rendering it which the context seemed to demand, without being alarmed by the fact that here was a subjunctive which he could not tag. Let us teach the nomenclature of grammar, by all means; but let us teach with it and teach more emphatically those things of grammar which have actual bearing on understanding the Latin.

I have laid stress on the foregoing principles because there can be no growth in power without them. I would not weary you by the discussion of minor details, but there are three other points on which I should like to touch briefly.

First, while it is possible by a *tour de force*, as Professor Hale has proved, to make pupils *read* in the Latin order, and while they will naturally learn to do this when they have reached the stage of reading Latin, as someone says, without tasting it, I have found it much more practicable to follow the old-fashioned rule of *translating* first the subject with its modifiers, then the predicate, then the modifiers or adjuncts of the predicate. This adjustment must be made at some point in the process of translation, and I prefer to make it a matter of routine. I should vary this routine by occasional translations deliberately aimed to preserve the Latin order, when that order was necessary to secure right emphasis or to avoid tameness, and I should make some use of the metaphor as a convenient crutch; but I am convinced that for schoolboys, at least, the other way is better as a regular practice.

The other two points are attention to context and the use of the imagination. Attention to context is not, in my experience, to be had without persistent effort on the part of the teacher. Again and again we must point out that the Roman writer was not an imbecile, as our pupils would have us think, but that he had something to say. It is to establish a context that the writers of sight examination papers are directed to read the passage through several times before beginning to write. It might encourage our pupils to do this with more enthusiasm if they could be convinced of its importance by being shown English sentences whose drift was uncertain when read without a background. At any rate, the art of reading at

sight or otherwise is hardly worth acquiring unless it becomes the means of understanding the writer's thought. This granted, we may consider the part which imagination must play in the process. Somewhere in the passage will come an *x*—a word that the reader does not know, and cannot derive. Its form will show where it must be fitted in, but as a word it is an unknown quantity. Here imagination comes to the rescue, but not in the form of wild guessing. As science has posited the ether to explain phenomena inexplicable without it, so the mind which has grasped the context can create for itself something which shall connect the continents of thought on either side, and, so to speak, 'satisfy the equation'. I think the process is scientific; I am sure it is a truly intellectual process; and it seems to me that the teacher who can develop in his pupils sufficient mental voltage to produce a spark which can leap across the gap at such a point has given them his utmost gift—the gift of mental power founded on ordered knowledge.

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### THE SINON EPISODE IN VERGIL

The part played by Sinon in the story of the fall of Troy no doubt received attention among the early Greek writers. The cleverness of his strategy in persuading the Trojans to take the Wooden Horse into their city would be as attractive to the Greek writers as the manifold strategies of the crafty Ulysses. Sophocles wrote a play called *Sinon*, of which only the merest fragments have survived, so that we have no clue as to the way in which he developed the plot and character. But it is only reasonable to suppose that he made the story entirely creditable to Sinon and the Greeks. While we need not insist on the distinction, as a rule the Greeks saw nothing unworthy in cunning and strategy, whereas the Romans preferred open warfare as being the more honorable. Because of this difference, we may believe that Vergil took no more than the outline of the story from the Greeks, and gave it a development more in harmony with the Roman attitude. He uses Sinon as an example of the Greek type: *accipe nunc Danaum insidias, et crimine ab uno disce omnis*. This represents Vergil's point of departure, with which the remainder of the episode must correspond, and it is at the farthest remove from what the Greeks must have adopted. Quintus Smyrnaeus, writing four centuries after Vergil, says nothing that detracts from Sinon's character, but by implication praises him (12.388): 'For a brave man's part is to endure to the uttermost'. The Greek Tryphiodorus, writing in the fifth century A. D., shows signs of familiarity with Vergil's account; yet he says nothing that might be considered derogatory to Sinon's character. Indeed, he applies to him the Homeric line (stereotyped, to be sure), 'And taking courage the crafty hero answered him'. Vergil nowhere suggests that Sinon is a hero.

Aside from the general aversion felt by the Romans toward this trait of Greek character, another circum-

stance determined Vergil's treatment of the episode. The poet must justify the surrender of Troy and the flight of Aeneas, or his story will suffer. His hero may not be overcome in open, direct assault, but it is not to his dishonor if he falls before the cunning wiles of his opponent. His readiness to believe the story of an apparently helpless foe and to lend him aid may really add to his credit. We see in Book 3 that the Trojans receive their Greek foe Achaemenides. So, in Book 2, Aeneas and his Trojans are completely justified, for, through the snares and the cunning of perjured Sinon, through his tricks and feigned tears, they were captured whom not Tydides, nor Larisaean Achilles, nor ten years and a thousand ships could subdue. Herein the larger purpose of the episode is clearly manifested.

The success of this larger purpose depends upon the art which Vergil employs in developing the incident. It is at this point that the poet has shown a skill which seems to the writer to have been inadequately recognized.

The entire episode is included within 142 lines, of which 111 lines comprise the speeches of Sinon. So we may rightly regard the effort of the poet as oratorical rather than dramatic. Early writers probably found the mutilation of Sinon, as copied by Quintus Smyrnaeus and Tryphiodorus, more suitable for a dramatic exhibition, but Vergil, following his oratorical inclinations, omitted this feature. The skill with which Vergil has worked out the Sinon incident suggests that he had some familiarity with the oratory of the Roman Forum, though it is not necessary to believe, as some have done, that he had any particular person in mind in this and other incidents, as Cicero, for example, back of his *Drances* in Book 11.

Sinon really makes four speeches, and in this fact the poet has shown his skill. A single speech of 111 lines would have proved too tedious for his listeners and would probably have failed in its purpose. Each speech has a fitting close. The first, which consists of but four lines, is hardly more than a prolonged wail. The psychological effect of the last line, *Dardanidae infensi poenas cum sanguine poscunt*, very naturally delays for the Trojans what Sinon professed to believe they would do. The effect is immediate and the Trojans' minds are turned and all violence is checked. The next speech, consisting of 29 lines, ends still more skilfully: *iam dudum sumite poenas: hoc Ithacus velit et magno mercentur Atridae*. Vergil shows keen perception of human nature, which perversely refuses to do what one's enemies would like to have done. The ending of the third speech, consisting of 37 lines, is exactly opposite to that of the second. For in the one case Sinon bids the Trojans inflict the punishment, while in the other he asks them to spare him. If these two endings had been reversed, the result would have been far less happy. Sinon did not plead for his life until he was sure of his ground. The fourth speech, of 41 lines, brings the climax. He has succeeded in carrying his listeners with him, and his final words suggest that which lies nearest their heart, namely, the waging of an offensive war on Greece.